

Aesthetic Pluralism vs. Parochialism: Ideological Tensions of Cultural Diversity

Kinya NISHI, Konan University, Japan

Faced with a bewildering variety of aesthetic experiences, we are discarding the idea of universally applicable definition of beauty, which supposedly has been employed in historically dominant aesthetics. Perhaps many of today's art critics and scholars in aesthetics have little desire to assume one standard experience of art and to suggest that there exists a hierarchy which regards certain types of art as more valuable than others. This sort of moral requirement for cultural relativism has urged anthropologists, for instance, to start reexamining the traditional European aesthetics' attitude toward cultural minorities and to even suggest to abandon the term "art" itself, claiming that it has too many Western connotations.¹ Similarly, modern European aesthetics has been attacked for its monolithic formulation in terms of gender politics. From feminist point of view, Professor Sarah Worth remarks '[s]tandard aesthetic theory oppresses women by assuming a gender-neutral, disinterested ideal spectator who in fact embodies a privileged, white male perspective.'²

Indeed, the uniform explanation of aesthetic judgment, often explained to be incorporated in the doctrine of "transcendentalism" or "disinterestedness", seems to be inadequate when we take into account varied socio-political circumstances surrounding our experience of beauty; and its critiques sound quite right in their radical attempt to include diverse perspectives. However, skepticism about this standardization of aesthetics must in its turn have its own social context. In fact, modern intellectual history suggests that even a demand for more generous aesthetic principle can lead us to a damaging attitudes in art theory unless we pay due attention to the context of aesthetic discourse as well as to the context of aesthetic experiences. In the following discussion, therefore, I shall outline the dynamic ways in which the concept of cultural diversity works in the actual discourse, sketching out two other types of mistaken views observed in multiculturalist aesthetics alongside the alleged monotonous formulation of beauty.

If dominant aesthetic theory is shaped by the reality of power, and if the supposedly universal account of aesthetic objects is really an exclusive and oppressive representation for the socially and culturally powerless, then the possible alternative to this system would be, as Edward Said simply put, 'a representational system that [is] participatory and collaborative, non-coercive, rather than imposed.'³ Yet it is vital here that an accusation of exclusiveness does not automatically secure a liberated position. Indeed, a brief glance at the history of attack on standard principles in general shows that the legitimate suspicions against universalism have often been manipulated by exclusive particularism.

The anti-universalist creed has a long tradition of two hundred years, probably with its origin in a reaction against the Enlightenment thought amongst romantic writers. The

essential character of romanticism is hard to define, yet philosopher Isaiah Berlin describes it in the following terms:

Whatever the differences between the leading Romantic thinkers, ...there runs through their writings a common notion ... that truth is not an objective structure, independent of those who seek it, the hidden treasure waiting to be found, but is itself in all its guises created by the seeker.⁴

Romantics had a general mistrust in universal definitions because they saw the world not as something illuminated by applying some sort of objective, eternal and unalterable truth, but as something man creates just "as he creates works of art". It is precisely this constructivist view which not only promoted worship of poets and musicians as the masters of creative apprehension of the world, but also has given aesthetics (i.e. an institutionalized discourse on human creative spirit) such a significant role in attacking universalism in defense of local traditions.

For Berlin, though, this romantic mode of thinking has a "darker side" too. In the political form of romanticism, "more sinister artists" began to destroy old society and create new one, showing little consideration for the costs. 'It is this embodiment of the romantic ideal', he observes, 'that took more and more hysterical forms and in its extreme ended in violent irrationalism and Fascism.'⁵ Even though it is not easy to tell whether we are still living in the period of "irrationalism and Fascism", it is plausible that our time remains enormously influenced by the romanticism and also that what Berlin calls "positive and negative heritage of romanticism" are even less separable today. This might explain the reason why the celebration of indigenous traditional culture, whereas it sounds innocuous and even righteous in the context of accusing pan-European doctrines, can be abused so easily within the minority cultures, as a political tool to encourage the people to identify themselves with the nation-state as well as to cut off their common identity from outsiders'.

In the field of cultural critique and social sciences, this process of ideological formation of national-cultural identity has been theoretically elaborated since Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983). The 1990s saw a further development of the account, for instance, in a concept of "fictive ethnicity". According to Etienne Balibar, this mechanism

constitut[es] people as a fictively ethnic unity against the background of a universalistic representation...It inscribes their demands in advance in a sense of belonging in the double sense of the term --- both what it is that makes one belong to oneself and also what makes one belong to other fellow human beings.⁶

It is essential, then, in the rhetoric of romantic cultural nationalism that the universal ideals appear as a serious threat to disappearing local customs, whereas the sense of bond with unchanged past takes on a nostalgic attractiveness. A bitter accusation against the idea of the progressive changes as utterly incapable Eurocentric project also gains massive popularity, thereby supplying the conceptual link between individuals in such unchanged practices of art and religion. As Immanuel Wallerstein describes,

...racism has always combined claims based on continuity with the past (genetic and/or social) with a present-oriented flexibility in defining the exact boundaries of these reified entities we call races or ethno-national-religious groupings.⁷

These analyses help us to notice a dialectical transformation from critique on Eurocentrism into an anti-European racism. Perhaps this shift has allowed countless cultural conservatists with their anti-universalist creed to take advantage of the overemphasis upon the emancipatory cause of culture. And the key to understanding this is a double-edged quality which exists in the notion of cultural diversity itself. As a charge against standardization of human lives cultural awareness draws due attention to the fact that human individuals are not exactly commensurable, but at the same stroke it suggests the possibility, or rather inevitability, of homogeneous unity of cultural community. This, I suppose, is an ambivalence inherent in the concept of culture. It hardly permits us to have a skepticism over oppressive general formulae, without forcing to accept the collective ideal of particular group, in other words to require sacrifice of individual freedom.

Typically, this latter, despotic aspect of culture is understated, if not concealed, in the discourse of cultural nationalism. If I may draw a fresh example from my own country, the current Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe recently endorsed nationalistic feeling, arguing that people are entitled to have their various cultural backgrounds and therefore a homogenized identity of global citizen would make them uninspired.⁸ Typical of a cultural nationalist, Abe regards the respect for the local cultural tradition, which is sensible enough, as incompatible with a sense of global civil liberty. For him, to foster universal values means a deplorable loss of cultural diversity, against which people with their own spontaneous ethnic creativity have to resist. He ignores the fact that each individual is a member of many social and cultural groups at the same time, nor does he acknowledge that an order of cultural community can be highly oppressive for independent individuals. This makes his theory of cultural difference, despite his insistence, a telling evidence that nationalism is often enough parochial.

We should not take it purely coincidental, though, that Shinzo Abe's book is titled *Utsukushii kuni e*, which can be translated as "Towards a Nation of Beauty" or even "Towards an Aesthetic Nation". From its founder Alexander Baumgarten onwards, aesthetics as a discipline has been undertaking a Herculean task to bridge the gap between universal human reason and private perceptiveness. In its attempt to assist the particular taste of individuals to acquire a sort of inverted universal status, the reasoning of modern aesthetics has often criticized the oppressive power of reason and assigned priority to the power of concrete sensation.⁹ One can easily point out here an ambivalent structure strikingly similar to the one in the discourse of culture. For, in the discussions on our sense of beauty, as in the advocacy of local culture, people are to abandon their absolute singularity in order to articulate a unique yet shared sense of different individuals. It is perhaps because of this similarity in the vacillation between liberation and constraint that the idea of "traditional sense of beauty" can cooperate so well with the anti-universalist culturalism to fashion collective identity, providing what critical scholars call "symbolic kernel" (Balibar) or "symbolic markers" (Morris-Suzuki¹⁰) of nationhood.

In fact, not just aesthetic discourse but the discourse on human sensation in general has been too often instrumental in inculcating cultural jingoism. Naturally this complicity between aesthetics and ideological formation of cultural identity counts as our second improper attitude in the aesthetics of culture. But perhaps nowhere is this error more visible than in modern intellectual history of Japan. Every aspect of cultural tradition

from Shintoism, animism, Bushido and Zen Buddhism up to language system and family structure was already mobilized in the notoriously ideological discussion in the 1970s over the uniqueness of Japanese culture. In the vast array of this trend, academics as well as popular writers were obsessed to interpret Japanese culture as radically different from other cultures. As a matter of course, account on art and the sense of beauty provided a great momentum to the trend, and even though the critical awareness on its ideological function has become heightened, and even though many of its assumptions have proved as invalid, various sorts of highly insular stereotypical explanation coined in this era are still exercising a tremendous influence on both foreign and native interpretation of Japanese art and the sense of beauty. Furthermore, this trend seems to see its culmination in Masahiko Fujiwara's book, *Kokka no Hinkaku* ("Dignity of Nation") published last year. In the book Fujiwara provides a stark contrast between Western logic and Japanese emotion in a manner characteristic of cultural nationalism, and concludes:

... I have proved that the reasoning is unqualified, and ... sought its alternatives in our sensitivity and sense of formality. We found our sensitivity on beauty in such notion as Mono-no-aware [a peculiarly Japanese response to the transience of beauty]; and we saw formality in our traditional sense of benevolence, sincerity, compassion, honor and justice which all derive from the spirit of Bushido. Japan therefore is under an obligation to demonstrate to the world that our sense of formality and sentiments unique to the Japanese people are superior to such concepts as "freedom" or "equality". These concepts are having a devastating effect upon our time, because, even if they pretend to be majestic with the help of reasoning, dogmas of "liberty", "equality" or "market economy" could never bring deep happiness to human beings, just as the doctrine of communism failed to do it.¹¹

The dreadful fact that this book has sold more than two and a half million copies and became the best-selling book of 2006 in Japan has deeply disturbed me, but equally disconcerting is the fact that polemics on the ideologically constructed identity is strikingly absent in the field of aesthetics. The situation makes one wonder what is responsible for the intellectuals' inability to offer powerful enough critique of the trend.

At one level, we may expound it as a specific case to this country, relating Japanese intellectuals' vulnerability toward the rhetoric of culture to their historical experience. The modernizing process of Japan exemplifies in a way the double function of culture as liberator and oppressor simultaneously. As the first industrialized power in Asia, the nation has oscillated between the bitterness and humiliation of the conquered Non-West on the one hand, and selfishness and arrogance of the conquerors on the other. Both universal ideals of modernism and rich local traditional values have been on offer to the intellectuals at their ideological choice, depending on the historical context. This is a climate where both negative and positive concern about universalism can exercise such a complex effect, not only to nurture an insular national pride but also to damage the critical thoroughness of the liberal thought. Even Edward Said's texts could have been read there, certainly with a feeling of righteous indignation against European imperialism, but without much qualm about our own sense of cultural superiority and our own Orientalist view towards other Asian countries.

At another level, one could regard the growing surge of cultural particularism as a global phenomenon, supposing that the aesthetic-cultural parochialism generally get popularity simply because it gives an impression of solving the problem of the standardization. Namely, there is an acute dilemma arising between the first and the second inadequate approaches, since a critical awareness over the dominant normativity can hamper our suspicion upon the ideology of minority cultures, and alternatively, a critical attention on

cultural chauvinism is usually raised by recourse to a universal values. This gives a reason for every scholar in aesthetics to be doubly cautious on their socio-cultural context.

Now, if neither the uniform definition of beauty nor a sweeping denunciation of it are adequate attitude, where can we seek our own model? Asking the question of where to seek the way to go beyond the dilemma and to discuss the cultural difference in a proper manner, one is tempted to conclude that plurality itself as a principle is the value we ought to follow. We can negotiate, so one can insist, legitimacy of our aesthetic judgment in a contextual, ad hoc way, without relying on any particular model. In fact, this is the path the liberal intellectuals have come down, in the last three decades, notably in postmodernism but also in various other theories with anti-systematic drive.

Unfortunately, however, it is increasingly clear that this abstract anti-authority cause tends to undermine our critical thought in a wider sense. The insistence of radical plurality is often the single most dominant position, giving a person an abstract excuse for not taking any position at all. In other words, the seemingly genuine alternative of pluralism can make itself ideologically dubious, if it is not put in the right context. As one of the most articulate critiques of this tendency reveals,

the opinion that plurality is a good in itself is empty formalistic and alarmingly unhistorical. So is the view that identity is negative in itself. Postmodernism tends to be dogmatically monistic about pluralism, which is of course very often a good, but by no means always.¹²

This formalistic pluralism must be regarded as the third possible mistaken view in the discussion over cultural diversity. It has been remarkably popular in Japan in the liberal discourse, as opposed to the traditionalist doctrine on the right which helps mystify Japanese culture as an alternative to corrupt European civilization. And this peaceful co-existence might help explain why the parochialism has not been effectively checked for such a long time.

On the global level, the rhetoric of formalistic plurality is both powerful and dangerous also because it is complicit with the consumerist culture. Again, one can point out the ambivalence in them, since the consumerist worship of diversity paradoxically makes all different objects exchangeable in the universal market. Against this backdrop, Professor Paul Crowther's point that contemporary aesthetic theories of cultural diversity is compatible with global market consumerism¹³ is fairly important.

To go back to our initial question, how can we construct a real alternative to Euro-centric aesthetics? Surely it is crucial to avoid carefully two simplistic alternatives to homogenized or uniform views (: parochialism and pluralism), as well as biased standardization. Nonetheless this does not mean discarding the ideal of universalism altogether. According to Wallerstein, the central ideological struggle of the contemporary world can be properly characterized not as struggle between universalism and particularism, but as the struggle between "European universalism" and "universal universalism."¹⁴ It is my belief that we should move forward to universal universalism, which is not just a rhetoric of pan-Europeanism but a genuine alternative to the existing ideology, in the field of aesthetics. To achieve this difficult aim, it is probably the most important to keep aware on the ideological tensions in the dynamic progress of the debate on cultural diversity. The idea of culture can oppress as well as liberate, just as the

universal values can camouflage the reality of inequality as well as emancipate the enslaved people. Any aesthetic theory which fails to recognize these contradictory elements would end up showing either insular disrespect for universal value or oppressive disregard for the particular.

¹ Cf. Higgins, Kathleen. 'Comparative Aesthetics.' *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*. Ed. Jerrold Levinson. Oxford University Press, 2003

² Worth, Sarah, 'Feminist Aesthetics.' *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*. Ed. Gaut, Berys and Lopes, Dominis Mcver, Routledge, 2001. p.439

³ Said, Edward W. *Power, Politics, and Culture*. Vintage Books, 2001. p.42

⁴ Berlin, Isiah. *The Power of Ideas*. Princeton University Press, 2000. p.202.

⁵ Berlin. *ibid.* p.204.

⁶ Balibar, Etienne. 'The Nation Form: History and Ideology.' *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. Ed. Balibar, Etienne and Wallerstein, Immanuel. Verso, 1991. P.96.

⁷ Wallerstein, Immanuel. 'The Ideological Tensions of Capitalism: Universalism versus Racism and Sexism' *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. Ed. Balibar, Etienne and Wallerstein, Immanuel. Verso, 1991. p.34.

⁸ Abe, Shinzo. *Utsukushii Kuni e. Bunshin-sensho*, 2006. p.92.

⁹ Cf. Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of The Aesthetic*. Blackwell, 1990

¹⁰ Cf. Morris-Suzuki, Tessa. *Reinventing Japan: Time, Space, Nation*. M.E.Sharpe, 1998

¹¹ Fujiwara, Masahiko. *Kokka no Hinkaku*. shincho-sensho, 2005. p.185

¹² Eagleton, Terry. *The Illusion of Postmodernism*. Blackwell, 1996. p.127.

¹³ Cf. Crowther, Paul. 'Normativity, not Cultural Theory: Aesthetics in the Age of Global Consumerism.' *International Yearbook of Aesthetics* Vol.8, 2004.

¹⁴ Cf. Wallerstein, Immanuel. *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power*. Verso, 2006.